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AUTHOR Storch, Ivy S.
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ABSTRACT

This paper reviews instructional strategies for dealing with learning-disabled preschool children in mainstreamed classrooms. It focuses on the teacher's role in developing the child's abilities in the areas of social skills, choices and anxiety, sequencing and routine, transition periods, and motor skills. To enhance social skills, peer interactions can be encouraged during free play periods, and art activities can be used to foster the relationship between the child and his environment. To reduce anxiety when the child is confronted with choices, the classroom should be arranged into specific areas for the different daily activities. The learning-disabled child needs sequencing and routine in his life, and many group activities that provide this are suggested. Transition periods may be eased by discussing the day's activities beforehand, announcing when a change of events is forthcoming, and making transition into a game. Fine and gross motor skills can be fostered during free play time or movement time by developing instructional strategies through task analysis. (Author/JDD)

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Meeting the Needs of Learning Disabled Preschoolers: Suggestions for Classroom Activities

Ivy S. Storch
Department of Education
Baruch College
The City University of New York

Running Head: MEETING THE NEEDS OF LD PRESCHOOLERS

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Abstract

Despite the growth of literature in the field of learning disabled children, relatively little research has been done in the area of the preschool child. While Public Law 99-257 (Education of the Handicapped Act Amendments of 1986) contains more provisions and increased financial incentive to serve more children by providing states up to $3,800 for each new handicapped preschooler they enroll, there are as yet few studies dealing with the preschool learning disabled, who may be difficult to spot, yet whose needs for early intervention are crucial. This article is written for the preschool teacher who has a learning disabled child in his or her classroom. Suggestions for modifying a preschool classroom and its daily activities, in ways that will help the child who has learning disabilities, are discussed.

Meeting the Needs of Learning Disabled Preschoolers: Suggestions for Classroom Activities

The mainstreaming of learning disabled youngsters has been seen as a way to assist them in developing positive role models through their interaction with non-handicapped peers. While mainstreaming might lead to expectations that the learning disabled would exhibit greater verbalization skills and a higher quality of play, studies show that this is not necessary the case (Guralnick, 1980; Burstein, 1986; Odom, Deklyen, & Jenkins, 1984). The success or failure of the learning disabled child in a preschool situation will depend as much upon the classroom grouping, pupil choice of activities and teacher supervision as on the mainstreaming conditions themselves (Burstein, 1986). The simple presence of the non-handicapped child in their midst will only be as successful a model as the manner in which the systematic interactions among these children are guided or encouraged (Guralnick 1980).

As educators, we need to develop strategies that will help us not only to deal with learning disabled preschoolers in our classroom, but to enable them to develop skills that will help them in their academic futures. The learning disabled cannot learn just by copying (Smith, 1978; Gresham, 1984). For a successful intervention strategy, careful planning by the teacher needs to be established. Since so much of what the learning disabled has had to face is failure (Gresham, 1984), the importance of well-structured activities that will maximize the children's skills and minimize the negative (Cook, & Armbruster, 1983) is crucial.

The preschool curriculum is almost ideally set up to enhance both the non-handicapped and the learning disabled child's cognitive skills (Kirk & Gallagher, 1986). At the preschool level, there are many differences in the rates of maturity and skill, a broader "normalcy" exists. Materials used in the preschool teaching situation can be adapted to these varied levels (Cook, & Armbruster, 1983). Many developmental abilities - knowing and recognizing, remembering, organizing ideas, problem solving - are skills concurrent with preschool curriculum (Lerner, Mandel-Czudnowski, & Goldenberg, 1981). The purpose of this article will focus on identification of strategies for dealing with the preschool child who has been identified as learning disabled. These strategies will be concerned with the areas of: social skills, choices and anxiety, sequencing and routine, transition periods and motor skills.

Many of the behavior characteristics common to preschool aged children resemble that of the learning disabled. All children exhibit some inappropriate behavior when they first enter a preschool or nursery school situation (Spodek, Saracho, & Lee, 1984). Whether identified before admittance into preschool or by behavior exhibited in the classroom, the learning disabled child will need the teacher to have strategies for dealing with his other special needs. For most children, both normal and learning disabled, the nursery school teacher will be very likely their first dealing with a class situation. The role of the teacher is a vital one to help the child develop a sense of autonomy and sequences of instructional strategies that he or she will carry with them into their academic life (Cook, & Armbruster, 1983), with the

preparations laid down in the preschool environment (Torgeson, 1980). This role becomes increased when learning disabled make up part of the population of the class. The learning disabled child may suffer from language disorders, lack of motor skills, inability to concentrate or to understand commands and ideas (Heward, & Orlansky, 1980). This child may become easily frustrated as a result of past failures. As a result of these difficulties, other children may be reluctant to play with this child if the teacher does not intervene, though it has been found that preschoolers are more acceptant of different modes of behavior than older children (Burstein, 1986; Devoney, Guralnick, & Rubin, 1974). Any approach, however, will be only as good as the teacher who implements it.

Social Skills:

Early intervention at the preschool level can help to counteract the effects of social separation, as many of the skills that start to appear around age three - substantial increase in cooperative play, mastering of an array of social and conversational strategies - occur rapidly in the preschool period (Guralnick, 1981). There is furthermore a belief that the learning disabled child's peer-related social behavior develops in a sequence that parallels normally developing children (Guralnick, 1980), hence the benefits to be derived from mainstreaming.

Free play periods can provide a chance for the teacher both to observe and to encourage peer interactions. As discussed, often these will not occur spontaneously (Jenkins, Speltz, & Odom, 1985). The

teacher can help to make this a positive social interaction (Spodek, Saracho, & Lee, 1984). While the effects of modeling to improve behavior has been discussed both for (Bandura, 1974; Edmister, & Ekstrand, 1987) and against (Smith, 1978; Gresham, 1984), there is evidence to support the fact that there is an increase in speech patterns, tactile skills and appropriate social behavior when the desired behavior is praised and encouraged and the negative behavior ignored (Bandura, 1974). All of these can be directed by the teacher, as free play time, perhaps more than any other in the day, enables the teacher to spend time with the individual and to provide peer interactions by involving several children in the activity. These informal settings have the potential to facilitate integration of the non-handicapped and the learning disabled children (Burstein, 1986).

Rules and guidelines are essential for free play periods, and for most classroom activities for all young children in general (Cook, & Armbruster, 1983). The rules for play should be simple and limited in number. Sharing, good manners, respect for the other children's feelings are all to be encouraged. The use of felt board figures to act out possible difficult encounters can enable the children to think of problem-solving solutions, as can the use of happy and sad face masks to assist them to tell when they may have hurt another's feelings.

Art time too can be an excellent chance to foster the relationship between the child and his environment, through the free discovery of color, of different materials such as clay and wood sculpture and by allowing the child to explore (Spodek, Saracho, & Lee, 1984). A large

group painting where all the children are encouraged to work together can be set up. Life-sized tracings of the children's bodies, which can be painted and collaged, are excellent ways to encourage body awareness through art, as are the making of masks. The making of and then acting out with puppets promotes not only the child's imagination, but it can be an effective way to work out classroom problems, through role playing. Even more than with skills that need to be specifically learned, art should be a time of expressive growth, without criticism of the results.

Choices and Anxiety:

The learning disabled child may become anxious when confronted with choices, or when in a situation as unstructured as free play (Smith, 1978; Burstein, 1986). Instructional strategies used with normal children can be effective when dealing with the learning disabled, with some modifications. The arrangement of the classroom is a good first place to start. A preschool room that is divided into specific areas, with clear places for the different daily activities, can be helpful to the learning disabled child to whom small, clearly defined areas spell security (Smith, 1978; Spodek, Saracho & Lee, 1984). Signs posted, with both the words and drawings of specific items - paper, crayons, farm toys, etc. - will enable the child to seek out the correct places for the things they choose to play with. Duplicate signs, which can be handed out to the child during clean-up time, can serve as a reminder of what items he or she needs to put away. He or she may be assigned a partner to work with. An area for group time can be delineated by a circle drawn on the floor, or chairs that will provide a

clear space for the child. Limiting
ease the anxiety. Free play periods
child with too much stimuli at once;
work spaces and a place for everythi
a quiet corner, with a chair, or cus
like this, where books may be availa
can observe the other children, befo
join in. Any child who spends too mu
encouraged to try one of the activit
corner is often recommended as a goo
haved in an unacceptable manner (Coo
places should not overlap. A time-ou
non-frightening area away from the o
the teacher. Time-out should be shor
for accepting it. Researchers have d
forcement of appropriate behavior do
ceptable behaviors (Spodek, Saracho,

Sequencing and Routine:

The knowledge that certain routi
tured, set parts of every school day
disabled who needs sequencing and ro
typical preschool day might start wi
activities will be discussed, items
discussed and songs sung. It is a go
catalyst for the children to share t
culties (Lerner, 1976). The prolonge

the choices to two items can help
can bombard the learning disabled
hence the need for clearly defined
ng in the room. This should include
nions. Many children need a corner
ble or records played, while they
re they feel comfortable enough to
ch time in this manner should be
ies available to him. While a quiet
d setting for a child who has be-
k, & Armbruster, 1983), these two
t corner should be a separate, but
ngoing activity, but within view of
t and the child should be praised
emonstrated that positive rein-
es lead to the extinction of unac-
& Lee, 1984).

-

ines that occur in class are struc-
may be comforting to the learning
utine in his life (Smith, 1978). A
th group corner, where the day's
brought in from home shared and
od time for the teacher to act as a
heir feelings and work out diffi-
d period of sitting and waiting

one's turn can be difficult for the
already mentioned might be the use o
anchor the child and help to define
which assist the children in recalli
of the week through games and repeti
A card game, where the children's na
ently shaped or colored card, and th
similar shape on a large board will
enlisted to help find others their n
here knows their name when they see
with perceptual problems.

Group times do require patience
child and the non-handicapped child.
flexibility on the part of the teach
be shortened or a new direction take
cellent time to promote a child's se
tioning, discussion of feeling, or a
Armbruster, 1983). The skill of lis
abled children will not acquire with
fostered here, through repetition, t
as possible and through word games a

Transitions:

One major source of frustration
school child, in fact for many presc
from one activity to another (Smith,
dread transition periods because man

easily distractible child. One way
f chairs, placed in a circle, to
a space for him or her. Songs,
ng each other's names or the days
tion, may help memory development.
mes are printed each on a differ-
en matched by the child to a
assist in cognition. Peers may be
ames. Reinforcing that not everyone
it can be reassuring to the child

from both the learning disabled
There should always be enough
er to see when a group time should
n. This time of day can be an ex-
nse of initiative, through ques-
role-playing time (Cook, &
tening, which many learning dis-
out specific instruction, can be
hrough stating direction as simply
nd riddles (Lerner, 1976).

for the learning disabled pre-
hoolers in general, is the shift
1978). Many teachers learn to
y children, and the learning dis-

abled child in particular, have tremend
gears. A learning disabled child involv
pencil physically removed from his hand
self. A discussion of the day's activit
tinely broken down into scheduled block
to expect can help. Be specific - annou
event - " Children, it's five minutes t
time now," can ease a child into the tr
signal the change. Singing a clean-up s
cards can make transition into a game,
and the anxiety of the learning disable
1979). Reinforcing those who exhibit ap
cleaning, who else is cleaning?", may l
behavior. This technique can be used f
Asking them if they can walk very quiet
can model the behavior of the teacher a
better than a instant call for all the
next activity.

Motor Skills:

Many learning disabled youngters a
gross motor skills. Free play period ca
skills in which the learning disabled a
successful activity from the previous d
veloping instructional strategies throu
effective here. For the child having di
sors, an elementary exercise with tongs

ous difficulty in changing
ed in a task may need to have a
; he may be unable to do it him-
ies and having that day rou-
s of time that the children come
ncements such as a change of
o clean-up time.","It's clean-up
ansition. A bell ringing could
ong and handing out clean-up
lessening both the frustration
d child (Bricker, & Sandall,
propriate behavior - " David is
ead the others into copying this
or other activities as well.
ly to the music room or if they
t the head of the line may work
children to line up to go to

re lacking in motor fine and
n focus on some of the various
re deficient. Repetition of a
ay can foster better skills. De-
gh task analysis skills can be
fficulty with the use of scis-
can be a first step (Cook, &

Armbruster, 1983). Cutting, beading, lacing and tracing all enhance the child's fine motor coordination. Fine motor skills can also be trained through toss and catch games.

Perhaps the hardest time of the day, yet one that is essential to the development of motor skills, is movement time, sometime an outdoor activity time. In an outdoor, open-ended play time, the learning disabled child may either act wildly, or more likely, be unable to join in any activity, unable to choose (Burstein, 1986). Often a movement time, where the children perform within a more structured mode, is more effective. Lines and shapes painted or drawn on the floor in an activity involving first listening to directions and then following, walking forward or backward on the line, skipping, hopping and jumping, can aid both perceptual and motor skills. Children can imitate animals, or imitate shapes of each others bodies, all enhancing their gross motor skills.

Conclusion:

Studies indicate that a small ratio (3-6 children per class of 15) of learning disabled to their non-handicapped peers provides the most favorable climate for interaction (Cook, & Armbruster, 1983; Odom, Deklyen, & Jenkins, 1984). This would provide more chances for the teacher to guide the interactions, and this guidance would appear to be the crucial factor in successfully integrating the learning disabled child (Burstein, 1986; Devoney, Guralnick, & Rubin, 1974). It has been suggested that preschool situations where there are mixed-age children

are often particularly successful, as the older child may serve as a guide for exploring new environments with the learning disabled child (Guralnick, 1976).

This article has described five areas pertinent to the preschool teacher as well as strategies for helping learning disabled preschoolers who may be mainstreamed into their classrooms. Although the activities were designed with the intent of meeting the needs of learning disabled preschoolers, the author feels that these activities are beneficial to both learning disabled and non-handicapped preschoolers because all children need a supportive and well-thought out introduction to their first school experience. Many of these strategies mention structure, but all should allow room for the child to grow and develop his own personality. Through encouragement, praise and by inclusion with other children, the preschool can become a strong foundation for later academic and social skills.

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